

# שמחה

## Simcha / Joy

Finding joy in a complicated world

### Inclining the Mind Toward Joy

Margie Jacobs

In the late 1980s, I studied the “learned helplessness theory” of depression with psychologist Martin Seligman. I had imagined becoming a psychologist since age 7, but there was something missing for me in the focus of my undergraduate psychology courses. That missing piece was *simcha* — joy.

A decade later, Seligman led the American Psychological Association in an inquiry of positive emotions. He began to ask: “What is joy and how do we become happier?” “How do people thrive in the face of adversity?”

Around the same time, the Jewish landscape began to shift. With dancing in the aisles on Shabbat and meditation services, contemporary Jews reclaimed the inquiry of the late 20th-century Hasidic masters, when they asked: How do we “serve God with joy?” (Psalm 100:2)

The Hasidic master Rabbi Nachman of Breslov said, “It’s a great mitzvah to be in joy (*simcha*) always.” Based on his own experience of depression, Reb Nachman acknowledged that it was hard work to acquire and maintain a sense of *simcha*. He was also clear that living in *simcha* did not mean disregarding the pain and suffering of life. “You should pick an hour each day to break your heart and to pour out your words to God...But the whole day long you should be in joy.” (*Likkutei Moharan 2:24*) Perhaps Nachman would agree that as we attend to the pain in our hearts, we have greater access to the joy that may also be there.

Conversely, we might learn that the more we settle our minds and hearts in joy and wellbeing, the greater will be our capacity to acknowledge suffering (ours and others’) with compassion and courage.

Can our tradition really mandate an internal emotional state? James Baraz, author of *Awakening Joy*, suggests that while we can’t force ourselves to be happy, we can “incline the mind” toward joy. Through dedicated spiritual practice, we can make it more likely that we will experience joy more of the time.

Traditional Judaism instructs us to say 100 blessings each day. They are expressions of gratitude for the miracles of the workings of the body and of the world around us.

We look at the day with joy and, in Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel’s language, radical amazement or “eyes of wonder.” Even the most mundane aspects of our lives become miraculous and sacred. As Heschel writes:

“The beginning of our happiness lies in the understanding that life without wonder is not worth living. What we lack is not a will to believe but a will to wonder.” (*God in Search of Man*)

When I ask students to recall a time when they were joyful, they often speak of connection. Jewish ritual and prayer invite us to stop the rush of daily life, and focus on creating a sacred space to notice what we are doing. We slow down, pay attention, and have opportunities to connect and become mindful — paying direct attention to our moment-to-moment experiences. When we offer our children the ancient priestly blessing at holiday and Shabbat meals, we express our wishes for our children’s safety and peace. This is a sacred moment of passing blessings from one generation to

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Rabbi Margie Jacobs teaches mindfulness meditation and Jewish spirituality, and has the joy of working with couples as they prepare for marriage. Previously, she served as the Bay Area regional director for the Institute for Jewish Spirituality.

# NiSh'ma

On this page, we offer four takes on the idea of simcha, joy—and how we discover and embrace joy in a complicated world. Please visit <http://bit.ly/1pNvSJQ> and join the discussion about joy. Our online version is new and interactive, and we welcome your comments. —S.B.



**David Jaffe:** A wedding is one of the greatest moments of joy in Jewish life. Two separate individuals — with different personalities and different histories— choose to join their lives together. According to Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe, a

late 20th-century teacher of *mussar* — the Jewish discipline of moral development and applied ethics — it is this very joining that creates joy. What is joyful about the act of connection? Living separate, isolated lives can leave us vulnerable to thinking that life is simply about our own ego gratification. On the other hand, when we experience deep connection with another person, we know life is greater than our own self. Expanding our heart and giving to others become joyful experiences. And though relationships lacking mutuality may cause pain, the opportunity for love and giving that comes with connection remains a possibility.

Rebbe Nachman of Breslov's comment, "It is a great mitzvah to always be joyful," suggests that cultivating deep connectedness creates an underlying state of joy that is present even when one feels broken-hearted over a loss. Just as the sun remains shining behind the clouds, the reality of connection is always there, even when it is obscured by temporary feelings of emotional pain. We cannot avoid the pain that comes with loving, living, and losing. But cultivating and feeling connectedness gives us the strength to move through pain — to become resilient and find joy again.

Rabbi **David Jaffe** is an author, educator, and activist who focuses on the intersection of moral development and ethical action. His book, *Changing the World from the Inside Out* (Shambhala Publications) is forthcoming in September. Jaffe lives in Sharon, Mass. with his wife and two teenage sons.



**Justin Goldstein:** During the eighth to tenth centuries, our talmudic sages taught in *Avot DeRabbi Natan*, "Joy is referred to by ten names: rejoicing, joyousness, ecstasy, jubilation, enjoyment, exultation, cheerfulness, gladness, splendor, merriment." The

text is not serving as a thesaurus; rather, it comments on the myriad ways a human being experiences emotion. Even in a brief moment, we are able to experience multiple, and even contradictory, emotions.

## "Every joining of opposites produces joy... Every place where there is joy there is connection..."

Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe, *Aley Shur II* (1914 – 2005), the most significant *mussar* teacher of the late 20th century whose theory and practice are contained in this two-volume book.



**Emma Kippley-Ogman:** Joy runs through our three spring holidays — Purim, Pesach, and Shavuot.

At Purim, we experience the juxtaposition of opposites. We turn everything over until we cannot discern blessing Mordechai from cursing Haman. All year, we strive for righteousness, but on Purim, righteous and wicked meet, and we revel in the freedom from knowing which is which. On the morning after Purim, we put good and evil back in their places — moral clarity rushing back in.

Our experience of Purim — not knowing which role we play, righteous or wicked — leads us to the deeper joy of Pesach, when we are commanded to seek liberation for oppressed and oppressor, now knowing we could be either. Our experience of liberation on Pesach gives us the Torah's most-repeated commandment: Do not oppress the stranger, because we have been strangers.

Finally, on Shavuot, we learn the story of Ruth, a Moabite — the definitive "other" who becomes the ancestor of David, *mashiach*, and our ultimate redemption. The joy of Shavuot, then, is the deepest of all. We are simultaneously ourselves and the one we thought we hated, the one we thought hated us.

On Purim, we test the possibilities of opposites, and joy emerges; on Pesach we act on that radical experience for liberation; and, finally, on Shavuot, the deepest joy emerges as these opposites collapse altogether and we know that we are one.

Ordained by the Rabbinical School of Hebrew College, **Emma Kippley-Ogman** is a rabbi and teacher in the Twin Cities, MN.

Perhaps Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe, in his work *Aley Shur*, is suggesting that not only does the external joining of opposites produce joy, but when we become aware of our own *internal* opposites, we gain the potential to produce joy as well. Rabbi Yosef Gikatilla, the thirteenth-century Spanish kabbalist, in his *Sefer HaMishalim (Book of Parables)*, writes: "To what are joy and sadness similar? To day and night...Just as the day is connected to night and night connected to day; so too is sadness connected to joy and joy to sadness..." The boundary between day and night is fluid; one moment it is daylight, then you blink and it is night. Transforming sadness into joy is not a single moment either; it is a process. As Wolbe teaches, the "joining of opposites produces joy": Relationships are essential to that process of transformation — not because relationships are easy and inevitably produce joy, but because they offer us complexity and the opportunity to explore our own internal opposites. And through that process, we learn to find joy — in any of its ten names.

Rabbi **Justin Goldstein** was ordained in 2011 by the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies at the American Jewish University in Los Angeles. In 2012-2013, he was a Rabbis Without Borders Fellow and, since 2014, he has served Congregation Beth Israel in Asheville, N.C.

**Jewish sensibilities** are approaches to living and learning that permeate Jewish culture. The ideas, values, emotions, and behaviors they express, emanating from Jewish history, stories, and sources, provide inspiration and guidance that help us to respond creatively and thoughtfully to life's challenges and opportunities. Sensibilities are culturally informed lenses or memes, and after last month's issue exploring *lech lecha* (take yourself and go), *Sh'ma Now* this month is exploring *simcha* — finding joy in a complex world, and in June, *shevirah* — embracing imperfection.

## After Shiva, Glimpsing Joy

Susan Berrin

I've never been one for following commandments strictly — without some personal adjustment — especially those that prescribe emotional states. Though I observe the laws of kashrut and have only recently relaxed my notion of Shabbat, I recoil from the implied obligation to be happy — as suggested in the Mishnah in reference to the month of Adar (“*Mi sh'nichmas Adar, marbim b'simcha*,” “When Adar arrives, we (make) much joy”).

On the morning of *erev* Purim, I ended a week of sitting *shiva* for my 94-year-old-mother. Her long and purposeful life was devoted to distributing her enormous love among our large extended family. Though her death was neither a shock nor a tragedy, I felt astonishingly depleted after sitting at her bedside for several weeks, keeping her company as she very, very slowly let go of life. I was overcome by the finality of her death — knowing I would neither hear her voice nor feel the softness of her hand on mine again.

*“It is a great mitzvah to  
always be happy.”*

– Rebbe Nachman of Breslov

I could not feel the joy of the holiday. Casting about, I recalled the teaching of my friend and colleague, Rabbi Sharon Cohen Anisfeld on Midrash Tanchuma (a collection of legal discussions and narrative stories about the Tanach) concerning the book of Ecclesiastes. She points out that the verse, “God brings everything to pass precisely at its time, and also puts eternity in their hearts,” could be read as, “God hid the time of death from the human heart” by substituting the Hebrew word *ha'olam* (eternity) for the related Hebrew word *he'elim*, (hid). Building on the midrash, she writes: “If the Holy Blessed One had not hidden death from the human heart, it is possible that a person would not build and plant, for he or she might figure, tomorrow I'm going to die, so why should I stand and tire myself out for others? Therefore, the Holy Blessed One hid from human beings the day of their death, so that every person would continue to build and plant. Therefore, facing both the certainty and the mystery of our death, it is our purpose and our obligation to build and to plant — to live and to give life, as joyfully and as generously as we can.”

I sensed this last line as a rejoinder against apathy, as a gentle nudge toward living as fully as possible — letting joy wash over me, even in times of sadness. I thought of the notion of *hiddur mitzvah*, how we are instructed

to adorn in beauty a mitzvah: Rather than just reciting *kiddush*, we are instructed to say the blessing over wine using a particularly beautiful goblet. We amplify the experience. My mother amplified life with love; it wasn't enough to invite newcomers into her home, she made certain they felt welcome, part of the family, heard, appreciated. It was that additional attention — especially toward the vulnerable — that made her life of building and planting joyful and generous.

As I made my way out of mourning, I sat in that transitory place of slowly letting go of sadness. Certainly, it wasn't so much joy I hoped to experience that day as we headed into Purim, but rather some less densely weighted feeling — laced with gratitude that Judaism regulates mourning with incremental steps back toward life: the seven days of *shiva*, the *shloshim*, or 30th day after death, and the year of reciting the Mourner's Kaddish. And it was at this moment that I understood the aspirational decree to be joyful — if only for a brief interval. The structure of Jewish law would provide a way out of mourning, would lift me out of myself and reintegrate me into the world.

When I returned to work — to editing this particular issue of *Sh'ma Now* focused on “*simcha*” — I reread Rabbi Margie Jacobs' essay (see previous page) on using the spiritual practice of “mindfulness” to elevate oneself to joy. In particular, I resonated with her interpretation of Rabbi Nachman of Breslov — a Hasidic master: When attending “to the pain in our hearts, we have greater access to the joy that is also there.” At my desk, quiet, rereading this line, I felt both pain and comfort. I knew that sorrow would lift, memories would surface, occasions of

pure joy would be recalled, and the fullness of this, my blessed life, would eventually replace mourning.

**Susan Berrin** is the editor-in-chief of *Sh'ma Now*. She dedicates this essay to the blessed memory of her mother, Vera Berrin, *z"l*.

## From Anguish to Authenticity

*Yiscah Smith*

I woke up on my 50th birthday to the loneliest, most disconnected and painful day of my life. For decades — for as long as I could remember — I had felt as though I was a woman living inside a man's body. Joy was not a feeling I could access in my despair. But that day, something clicked in me. I was tired of living an inauthentic life. I knew something had to change. That day, I made the monumental decision to begin my gender transition journey.

Neither personal anguish nor the denial of it defines my life any longer. I no longer focus on the exhausting and futile attempt to transform self-delusion into reality. My life has now blossomed into one dedicated to authentic, truthful, and genuine living. With this, I experienced a sense of joy I never imagined attainable. I realized that I possessed the secret to living a life of authenticity — catapulting past the fear, shame, and guilt that had accompanied a life where I

was unfaithful to myself and enslaved to others' expectations of how I should live.

Until my transition, my gender-identity dysphoria consumed most of my energy, my creative spirit, and my very life. My potential to be a more loving and compassionate person never stood a chance to develop. As a result, I lived a survival-based life characterized by fear, low self-esteem, and mistrust of others.

I lived with the false illusion — due, in part, to my insecurity and deep desire to feel *included* — that in order to fully express my Jewish identity, I needed to pledge my allegiance to an established movement. I understood Judaism to be a culture delineated strictly for males and females. And yet, I was determined not to spend my life as an outsider.

Once I began to engage and explore my Jewish identity, I entered the paradox of living with both rejection and encouragement. I sensed that the Jewish tradition, and those who represented it, would welcome me and support my exploration. However, I also sensed that if people knew who I really was, rather than the imposter that I projected, they would cast me aside. And once I began to address my gender identity dysphoria — as I began to transition — my journey became also one of spiritual healing. Now, first and foremost, I seek acceptance from God. No religion, government, culture, and surely no spiritual discipline can own another person's soul. Hence, I no longer seek approval from others to live a life of truth. Rather, I dedicate my life to being in an honest relationship with my Creator, and, by extension, God's beautiful world. I greet each morning in radical amazement as I say, "*Modah*

*Ani*," thanking God for believing in me enough to bless me with another day where nothing is taken for granted and everything is incredible. I have established a foundation, strong and stable, to build upon as I continue my soul journey.

Authentic living granted me a sense of self-worth as I became faithful to my own essence, my soul. It brought a joy of living; it birthed a "me" that I barely recognize at times. My journey became as much one of spirituality and healing as it was one of gender transition. I began to feel quiet inside, filled with a sense of harmony and gratitude. More important, though, I began to feel a part of the world rather than apart from the world.

My transition taught me that healing one's brokenness means developing a different way of interacting with oneself and with the world. My gender transition empowered me to move from a defensive, reactive posture to a more proactive way of thinking, speaking, and behaving, flavored with gentleness, kindness, and compassion.

I spent most of my life desperately hoping that I would someday wake up from the nightmare of my life — from a life where "what is, isn't, and what isn't, is." Now, I continuously hope never to wake up from the dream of my life. Mine is now a life in which "what is, is, and what isn't, isn't."

**Yiscah Smith** is the author of a recent memoir, *Forty Years in the Wilderness: My Journey to Authentic Living*. She lives in Jerusalem, where she teaches Jewish spirituality at the Conservative Yeshiva, as well as online. She also provides private spiritual guidance for authentic living.



Art by Judith Margolis

## Unifying Justice and Joy

Alan Abrams

The story ends in tears.

The tears themselves were certainly bitter. But, surprisingly, they were shed over a source of great joy: the very temporary creation that was the beautiful body of Rabbi Yohanan, a person with the magical power to help heal Rabbi Eleazar. But, like all living things, Rabbi Yohanan's body would also someday end up as dust, and it was over this that they cried.

The talmudic story of R. Yohanan's visit (*Brakhot* 5b) underscores a strange and powerful thing we know about joy: It is often found during times of great uncertainty — even when our very existence is threatened. Illness, in particular, forces us to consider — and rediscover — the joy of what we value most. R. Yohanan begins his visit by asking his ill friend whether his sufferings are welcome to him — are they something to be embraced as a loving gift from God, a question that has troubled people of faith through the ages. R. Eleazar gives a surprising answer for an ancient religious leader — “Neither them nor their reward.”

Today, the idea of welcoming suffering may seem strange. But, in fact, we might sometimes embrace suffering as if it is a gift of love driving us toward the good and even the godly. The current Black Lives Matter movement, for example, is drawing attention to the suffering of oppressed minorities. Responding to that movement are campus protests among the young and privileged — expressions of rage and sometimes shame: “How dare I enjoy my life

when others are suffering?” And, “My worries are just first-world problems.” This rage inspires people to work for social justice, taking personally God's command: *Tzedek, tzedek* — justice, justice — you shall pursue. (Deuteronomy. 16:20)

A year-and-a-half ago, my wife and I made *aliyah* in the midst of the last Gaza War, a time of great uncertainty about the future. This uncertainty has resonance with the uncertainty faced by the early Zionists. They, inspired by the biblical call for *tzedek*, understood the establishment of the State of Israel as a way to establish justice in the wake of terrible crimes against the Jews. Among those early settlers in the Yishuv were spiritual Zionists like A.D. Gordon, who came to the land of Israel in search of joy. They saw Israel mostly as the place where they could live their lives to the fullest. So, too, did my wife and I choose to come here in pursuit of joy and a fuller life. As I write this, life is alive for us in one very poignant way: the birth of our first child mere days ago.

We are drawn to making Israel a more just land for all — Jews, Muslims, and Christians. We see our justice work as being intricately linked to our spiritual pursuit of joy. My professional work is also about that spiritual pursuit of joy. As a chaplain and an educator of chaplains, my work has become a spiritual practice that helps me to find joy even in the presence of suffering. When faced with dark and discouraging moments, I try to bring solace and hope. I direct my heart to a belief that it's always worthwhile to offer new sources of hope when old sources have been broken or run dry. Even when there is no hope of life, I try to connect the

*“When people are joyous, they are at their best: they are generous, kind, grateful, reverent.... whatever occasions joyous laughter turns out to be sacred.”*

– Rabbi Lawrence Kushner

people I work with to the awesome beauty that is Creation. Joy, then, is being able to walk through life knowing that what's in the interest of others is what brings joy to us. Maybe it's about being able to see that getting in touch with our prophetic anger at injustice is only a first step on the way to healing our broken world. We need to heal ourselves, too, by unifying our interests in justice, and, in joy.

In the coming months, God willing, my wife and I will go with our new daughter to the American consulate to get a passport. For a birthplace, the American government will list Jerusalem, a name whose root is *shalom/salaam* — meaning wholeness. But in a sign of how broken our world still is, government officials will list no country, as if Jerusalem is a city disconnected from the world. Though I will likely feel pained looking at that lonely name, mostly I expect to feel joy — and a sense of hope that peace will ultimately come when we are able to love our joy more than our suffering.

Rabbi Alan Abrams is director of the HavLi Center for Spiritual Care Education and Research at the Schwartz Center for Health and Spirituality in Jerusalem.

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the next. Mindfulness teachers Sylvia Boorstein and Rabbi Sheila Weinberg suggest a contemporary practice in which we send similar blessings not only to those who are most dear to us, but to all people.

In our fragmented culture, Judaism offers precious opportunities “to restore a sense of unity, joy, and connectedness in a world in which brokenness seems inevitable.” (Estelle Frankel, *Sacred Therapy*) We are reminded that we are not alone when we say Kaddish in a minyan. And at the Passover seder, when our rituals are those that have existed for generations among Jews around

the world, we feel a sense of belonging. In his latest book, *Flourish: A New Understanding of Happiness and Well-being*, Seligman emphasizes that cultivating wellbeing requires not only gratitude and connection, but also a sense of purpose and meaning. Acting with kindness and compassion and working for justice can provide us with a sense of purpose rooted in Judaism, which also brings meaning and joy.

In our complex world, it is possible to incline our minds and hearts to greater appreciation, connection, meaning, and *simcha*.

*“Where there is rejoicing,  
there should also be  
trembling.”*

–BT, Berakhot 30b,  
Rav commenting on Psalm 2:11

#### Editor-in-Chief

Susan Berrin

#### Founding Editor

Rabbi Eugene Borowitz, z”l

#### Market Development Director

Robert J. Saferstein

#### Design

Emily Rich

#### Contact

info@shma.com

#### For editorial inquiries, contact

sberrin@shma.com

#### Advisory Board

Rachel Brodie

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# Consider & Converse

A Guide to *Simcha*

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## Introduction

*Sh'ma* curates conversations on a single theme rooted in Jewish tradition and the contemporary moment. At the heart of this issue of *Sh'ma* is the theme of “*simcha*”—“Finding joy in a complicated world.” The perspectives shared in these pages are meant to be expansive — to inspire reflections on Judaism and possibility in ways you may not have considered before. They aim to hold discord. We hope that the richness and diversity of these essays will show you new perspectives that are personally meaningful and edifying.

*Sh'ma* has never viewed learning or “meaning-making” as solely an individual activity. That’s why we have included this guide, that is specifically designed to help you consider the idea of going forth independently or with others, formally and informally.

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## How to Begin

This guide offers a variety of suggestions, including activities and conversation prompts for individual contemplation and informal or more structured conversations. We suggest that you use this guide to share reflections and thoughts over a Shabbat meal, or else, for those who are more adventurous, to lead a planned, structured conversation, inviting a small group of friends and family to your home or to a coffee shop. To support your conversation, you can print out a PDF of the entire issue focusing on “*simcha*” from <http://forward.com/shma-now/> or email Susan Berrin, *Sh'ma* editor-in-chief, at [SBerrin@shma.com](mailto:SBerrin@shma.com).

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## Guidelines for Discussion

If you wish to hold a structured conversation, the following guidelines may help you to create a space that allows for honest personal exploration through sharing:

- Create a sense of shared purpose that can foster the kind of internal reflection that happens through group conversation.
- Remind participants of simple ground rules for conversations. For example: Avoid commenting on and critiquing each other’s comments. Make room for everyone to speak. Step into or away from the conversation appropriately. No one participant should dominate the conversation. Let silence sit, allowing participants to gather their thoughts.
- For each of the questions below, we recommend you print out the article in question, or provide the link to it, and ask people to take a moment to read it in print or on screen, before the conversation begins.
- Allow people a few minutes to absorb the article, perhaps even to read it a second time, before moving into the discussion.

# Consider & Converse

A Guide to *Simcha*

## Interpretive Questions

*can focus the reader on the ideas in the articles.*

- **Rabbi Margie Jacobs** (p. 1) writes that while we can't force ourselves to be happy, we can "incline the mind" toward joy through dedicated spiritual practice. When you have felt despair or sadness, have you been able to also experience joy? Under what conditions? Does the "joy" feel different?
- **Susan Berrin's** essay [p. 3] describes the aftermath of mourning her mother. Rabbi Nachman of Breslov's taught, "It's a great mitzvah to be in joy (*simcha*) always"? But the talmudic sage Rav said, "Where there is rejoicing, there should also be trembling." (*Brachot* 30b, Rav commenting on Psalm 2:11, "Serve God with awe, rejoice with trembling.") How do you understand these two—somewhat contradictory—statements, especially as they pertain to Jewish mourning customs?
- In **NiSh'ma**, [p. 2] four writers explore the idea that the "joining of opposites produces joy." Look specifically at **Rabbi Justin Goldstein's** commentary where he says, "when we become aware of our own *internal* opposites, we gain the potential to produce joy..." Do you agree with the way he links this to the fluid nature of day and night? **Rabbi Emma Kippley-Ogman** examines how joy runs through three spring holidays (Purim, Pesach, and Shavuot). But something "unexpected" courses through and ties these holidays together. What?

## Reflective Questions

*can help integrate the ideas in these articles with one's own sense of self.*

- In **Yiscah Smith's** essay [p. 2], she shares her pursuit of living a more authentic life—one where she will not seek constant distraction. What part of that process did you identify with, and how does striving toward authenticity intersect with living a life of joy?
- **Rabbi Alan Abrams** [p. 3] recently moved with his wife to Israel in pursuit of joy. How does living in a specific place influence our emotional states? Where—to what place—do you go to find joy?